

Rev Alice Home Movies

New Preface and Afterward for my article

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### **Preface, 2017.**

I wrote this essay in the mid-1980s and it was published in a themed issue of *the Journal of Film and Video* on home and amateur under the farsighted editorship of Patricia Erens. The collection was pioneering work that reflected various developments in related areas. Folklorists, ethnographers, and visual anthropologists were reading amateur films in new ways. At the same time technological changes gave many more people access to relatively inexpensive moving image recording. Some artists were creating new work documenting daily life, and some intellectuals pushed cultural, political, and social analysis looking at the personal and everyday in a more sophisticated way.

Subsequently, all of these concerns became richer and deeper as new investigations and institutions expanded the media studies field. Some scholarly milestones: Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Indiana University

Press, 1995) provides a generous survey concentrating on the U.S. and how this consumer technology was used there. Michelle Citron, *Home Movies and other Necessary Fictions* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1999) details the artist's own life and creative work particularly through the use of family home movies in her film *Daughter Rite*. Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann, eds., *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2008) provides an international overview of amateur domestic movies. And Charles Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema: The Rise of North American Moviemaking, 1923-1960*. (Berkeley, U of California Press: 2014) concentrates on the technical/industrial and institutional structures that gave rise to noncommercial filmmaking.

In addition, important archival work in the U.S. and abroad has collected and preserved home movies which are now often valued for their unique presentation of “from the ground up” evidence of ordinary people's lives, particularly of under represented populations. (Including, of course, the Center for Home Movies, this very site.) A good example would be Professor Jacqueline Stewart's work in building a South Side Home Movie project documenting the otherwise little seen daily life of African Americans in Chicago in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This body of steadily growing work is connected to the pioneering Chicago Film Archives that makes a point of collecting and preserving Midwest regional nontheatrical motion pictures. It, along with similar centers around the country, sponsors “home movie days” encouraging people to find and contribute their family collections.

As a child growing up in the post WW2 era, I had various occasions to see slide shows (typically of exotic vacations abroad) and some home movies (often travels, some of gatherings) within the extended family, with neighbors, and family friends. Home screenings in general were often referred to with jokes and mild disparagement by comedians who reminded middle class viewers of the often boring and conventional nature of the images. Having an excuse to leave when this post-dinner ritual was to begin was a “smart” strategy to avoid dozing off. To some extent the television set has displaced the projection screen.

But I always looked forward to my aunt’s movies: they were funny and clever and, of course, the depicted people I knew well. My aunt Alice continued to makework after my article was published, and I’ll discuss that briefly in an afterward.

[Full disclosure: Zimmerman, Citron, Stewart, and the folks at the Chicago Film Archives are all friends and colleagues.]

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### **Afterward, 2017**

My aunt Alice continued to make movies after the ones I discussed in my 1986 article. Her favored form was the comic imitation of classic Hollywood features that could easily showcase her grandchildren and children. They were thus social occasions in which the

making of the film was part of a group effort, during a gathering of the clan, and aimed at the fun of collaboration as well as a finished project that could be viewed and re-viewed later. One thing changed: a switch to consumer format video that allowed for a more versatile soundtrack while sacrificing image quality achieved in the previous use of 8mm and S8mm film.

In the late 1980s, *Gone with the Wind* restaged 1939's epic melodrama. Appropriately it starred Alice's younger daughter, Barbara, as Scarlett O'Hare. Barbara had always loved the film, the novel, and the fancy dresses of the costume drama. This was a perfect match of fantasy and fun recreation. Also, as a fable of an overly romantic woman who learns from life and finally matures, the story narrative had a certain autobiographic resonance. Barbara had an early marriage to a handsome scoundrel. They divorced quickly. Working as a nurse, she then met Rich when he was recovering from a motorcycle accident, they fell in love and he was a great family man. Of course, outsiders wouldn't know that backstory, but within the family, which is the primary target audience, there's a bittersweet tone to the narrative, at least for the older generation who know the history. This also solves a practical problem since Rich (who had an appropriately dashing mustache) liked being in the home movies and could play Rhett Butler, allowing for an authentic passionate kissing scene. (Scarlett's crush on Ashley famously remains unfulfilled, and in Alice's iteration, he is played by Barbara's older brother.)

Costumes are part of the fun, particularly for Barbara who gets several different sensational gowns. (The tight lacing scene with the corset is omitted; just Barbara in a bra

while dressing.) Inevitably, it would seem, there's blackface: with "Mammy," played by older sister Pat and "Prissy" played by her niece Melissa. While you couldn't do the story without these key characters, the inherent racism of the depictions remains. In more recent years, especially with the vast increase in African American actors on film and television screens, the problems with earlier depictions have become more obvious.<sup>1</sup>

The film includes a "ballroom" scene (shot in Alice's dining/living room) with everyone doing a Virginia Reel, and staircase sequences (again with the two-story modern house subbing for a colonial Southern mansion), and what is probably a Civil War re-enactor's Confederate general's uniform. The burning of Atlanta sequence is actually pirated footage from a VHS tape inserted into the film (or perhaps shot off the TV screen). This marks what is an interesting technical and aesthetic development. In the pre-video era no one had ready access to classic films. At best one might catch a favorite on late night television. But the introduction of home video decks and a whole consumer rental market starting in the late 1970s meant that you could rent or purchase films and view them whenever you wanted. It also meant that with very simple two decks and cables you could dupe rental tapes for your own use, and actually do simple insert edits from a source to your own tape in progress. The net result was the potential for a closer repeated study of the original in a derivative imitation like this, as well as the wholesale

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss some of this with reference to *Gone With the Wind* in: "Anger or Laughter? The dialectics of response to *The Birth of a Nation*," in Michael T. Martin, ed., *Untitled The Birth of a Nation* anthology, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2017. Forthcoming.

reproduction of parts of the original film (that is a VHS copy of the film) including the soundtrack.

1989's *The Wizard of Oz* operates in a similar vein. The Alice version spotlights her granddaughter Melissa, a teen, who early on showed talent in singing and performance. As Dorothy, she shines, using her own voice against an orchestral background. Siblings play the Scarecrow and Lion/Good Witch and a young cousin plays the Tin Man in a clever homemade cardboard outfit. When knocked on, the special effects crew bangs on a pot to get (near) synch sound from the “metal” man. Other kids get to play Munchkins and Guards.

Given the make-believe nature of the original, this imitation often works quite well: Dorothy's dog, Toto, is here a stuffed animal she can carry about. “Kansas” is a small rural location with an outbuilding while Alice's backyard covers other outdoor shots (clearly shot at different times due to a summer look in one and snow on the ground in another). And the “Tornado” is a cone of wool attached to an electric eggbeater which turns on to spin the dramatic storm as a toy house goes flying through the sky (on fishing line).

With fewer effects and costumes, the remake of 1990's *Home Alone*, relies on broad humor and farcical recreations of key moments in the original film. Icy steps are done with cellophane wrap over the front stairs, a foiled intruder flies off to a rough landing (done with a dummy whose head keeps falling off in the outtakes reel). Stunts, traps, and

falls galore. The entire cast gets separate portrait shots for the credits, including a gag inclusion of “Joe Paterno.” At the time he was the most famous person in Alice’s home town, State College Pennsylvania. This inclusion was done with a color photo of the record-holding football coach. (A few years later Paterno was disgraced when it was discovered he covered up a pedophile scandal involving one of his assistant coaches.)

*Home Alone* comes in at a little over half an hour, and the long outtake section that follows (27 minutes) shows the making as a family group activity, enhanced because several participants have camcorders and thus there’s lots of footage, overlapping takes, and so forth. There’s also a frequent glitch in the prime camera with video shearing of the image and other breakdowns from time to time. Probably the most enduring part of the whole tape is at the end of the outtakes where the extended family’s new toddler, Tori, entrances everyone by getting into high-fiving and throwing her arms up and exclaiming “yea!” again and again. Everyone is gathered around in the living room, relaxing and in a holiday mood. The little kid is encouraged to find various folk’s belly buttons, and does so with innocent delight. Simple pleasures, family bonding.

A few years later another large scale production brought off *Alice in Wonderland*. Centering on Alice herself as the title character, the film includes two summer visitors, her sister Mildred Kleinhans (my mother) and Kate Nelson, a younger second cousin. Again clever casting and costumes appear: the White Rabbit, the singing flowers, the playing cards, the Caterpillar, the Cheshire Cat, the Queen of Hearts, the Mad Hatter, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, and so forth. The large cast is put through energetic

paces, but most of the singing is simply miming to the existing soundtrack of the Disney animated film from the 1950s. And cinematic wit largely fits the prop gimmicks of “bigger” and “smaller” after Alice goes down the rabbit hole.

In 1998 a final film, a recreation of two *I Love Lucy* sketches appeared. Alice and Patty as Lucy and Ethel boisterously stomp on “grapes” in one, and they get jobs working on a candy production line which speeds up driving the hapless pair into a frantic attempt to keep up. These are broad farces based in famous moments in the TV sitcom. Former child star Danny, present in earlier Alice excursions, is now old enough to play Ricky (the Desi Arnez character). Behind the camera, Rich tries to control the many blown lines, messy actions, as scenes are run again and again.

Alice’s life changed around this time. She met a widower, Woody Breon, and they married. Her grandchildren were now grown up and there were some great-grandchildren. Her daughter Pat died following complications from multiple sclerosis, and daughter Barbara contracted debilitating Lyme Disease that took years to diagnose. Her sister Mildred, now in her late 80s, could no longer live at home alone in the Chicago area and moved to State College into a retirement and nursing facility. Alice continued to be active: a square dance group, a jug band, and producing a Saturday night “Praise Service,” for her new church that aimed at engaging young people in a music and performance oriented alternative to the traditional Sunday service.



Alice had always been a talented and very funny storyteller, especially in relating events in her own life in comic terms. These family stories, which often revolved around Alice being a naïve person in a situation which then had a sudden reversal and reveal, were a delight and often told and retold at holiday gatherings. Alice was motivated to turn them into a book, *Green Gravy, Monster Bread, and Other Adventures: An American Experiences Post-War Japan* (Lexington Kentucky, ExLibris, 2011)

My favorite tale involved how, needing school clothes for her kids while her Air Force officer husband was stationed in Japan, she found the military base store didn't have any. Alice decided to get the cloth and make them herself. Needing a seamstress, she innocently remembered an office outside of the base's main gate with a sign in English that indicated it was a "labor exchange." Inquiring there, she was told they did know a woman who could sew and told her to meet the person at the gate the next morning. A young woman was there the next day, and on arrival at Alice's home the family's Japanese housekeeper was upset and alarmed, spotting the new arrival as a local "bar girl" (to use a euphemism). Alice set the young gal to work and she did a good job. As it quickly turned out, Byron, an Air Force intelligence officer, returned home asking Alice why she had been seen going into the local Communist Party headquarters. Military intelligence and her matronly housekeeper were shocked, but all was reversed when other officers' wives found out about the seamstress because they too needed sewing to be done. As it turned out, everything worked out for all concerned and the hooker found a new steady occupation with her seamstress skills.

That book was followed by another, this time recounting stories from childhood teen years and enhanced with many family snapshots. *Holes in my Shoes: One Family Survives the Great Depression* (Lexington Kentucky, ExLibris, 2012). Dedicated to her great grandchildren and beyond, the repeated moral pointed to how a rich social life could be found with economically simple means, that materialism and consumerism should not be valued over family and friends. Implicitly appropriate for the era of the Great Recession of 2008.

Film scholars have written a lot in recent decades about film and memory. Recall, reinterpretation, amnesia, and witness have all been brought into the mix. I see my aunt's work a little differently. Within the extended family, my aunt Alice's home movies provide most essentially the pleasures of recognition: here's what we looked like then, these people are worthy of being captured in a movie, the collective makers are validated as creative artists. Nothing overblown, just appropriation of commercial and industrial culture for a local and familial face. Movies plus Home. Worth putting together.

Home Alone restages the